



Digital Defiance. Memetic Warfare and Civic Resistance

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Abstract

In the digital age, warfare has extended into the online realm, transforming the information sphere into a critical battlefield. Information warfare has become a crucial component of modern conflict, giving rise to diverse strategies and tactics. This article examines memetic warfare within the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, focusing on the battle for truth against Russian information pollution. Rooted in the Maskirovka strategy, Russia constructs false realities to mislead and manipulate audiences. In response, defensive memetic warfare has emerged, using memes infused with humour, sarcasm, and irony to sway public opinion, counter falsehoods, and promote media literacy. This study explores the role of the civic resistance group North Atlantic Fellas Organization, a decentralised movement, in combating pro-Russian narratives and targeting Russian information pollution. Through digital ethnographic research and contextual analysis, the study examines NAFO's meme campaigns concerning significant issues indirectly affecting Ukraine, such as Russian propaganda, US President Trump, the US Republican party, and Russia's network of allied states and actors.

Keywords Information pollution · Memetic warfare · Defensive memes · Humour · Civic resistance · NAFO

Introduction

In the age of digital warfare, the battle for truth is fought as much online as on the ground. The Russia-Ukraine war starkly illustrates this phenomenon, with fabricated stories and propaganda flooding the online ecosystem and transforming communication platforms into a battleground (Zannettou et al., 2019; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017, p. 1030). The information war extends beyond governments and military operations, with grassroots movements like the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO) engaging in a David-versus-Goliath struggle, using unconventional and innovative strategies to counter Russia's military and digital dominance. These groups work to expose Russian information pollution, counter falsehoods, and prevent the manipulation integral to Russia's strategy (Munk, 2024b, p. 7, 77–78; Munk, 2023b; Munk, 2023c; Munk & Ahmad, 2022).

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Information warfare, a key part of cyber warfare, uses mass media, governmental and Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs), and public movements to achieve political and military goals. It targets information systems, spreads disinformation, misinformation and malinformation and manipulates public opinion to destabilise governance and weaken opponents (Lilly, 2022; NATO, 2005; Munk, 2024b, p. 49–50; Golovchenko et al., 2018, p. 976; Thornton, 2015). Information warfare is embedded in Russia's strategy as a tool to preserve the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) narrative and counter perceived Western interference, including events like the Arab Spring (2011) and the Euromaidan protest (2014) (Jaitner, 2015, pp. 88, 92; Golovchenko et al.; 2018, p. 979; Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015, p. 40; O'Loughlin et al., 2020). Russia often frames its information warfare as a response to similar tactics allegedly used by the West to destabilise Russia and spread *Russophobia*. Both sides conduct extensive online campaigns, with social media users knowingly/unknowingly amplifying the authorities' narratives. These further muddle the discourse and erode public trust (Mejias & Vokuev, 2017; Golovchenko et al., 2018).

A key tactic in information warfare is the dissemination of falsehoods, absurd narratives, and deceptive content, which is conceptualised as information pollution. The United Nations (UN) describes this phenomenon as the spread of false, misleading, or manipulated information, whether intentional or accidental, that can lead to societal or physical harm (UNDP, 2022a). Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) categorise this phenomenon into three types:

Disinformation False information deliberately shared to cause harm.

Misinformation False information shared without harmful intent.

Malinformation Genuine information shared with harmful intent.

Information pollution has become central to political discourse, with terms like fake news and alternative truth now commonplace. However, these terms represent only a narrow aspect, encompassing broader societal impacts. Notable examples include the 2016 and 2024 US Presidential elections, where information pollution campaigns significantly influenced public opinion during the campaign. The use of misleading or false information is not new. However, the digital age has amplified its reach and impact, making it harder to combat and more influential in modern political and military conflicts (Jones, 2021, pp. 173–175; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 20; Lee & Jia, 2023, pp. 30–31; Lavorgna, 2021, p. 3). This paper will collectively refer to disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation as information pollution (umbrella term).

The Russian strategy is based on *Maskirovka* (meaning *little masquerade* or *to mask*). *Maskirovka* employs camouflage, imitation, distortion, and divergence to create ambiguity and manipulate perceptions (Maier, 2016; Kamphuis, 2018; Ahmad & Munk, 2025, p. 99). Historically, it has been used to mislead adversaries and secure tactical advantages, but now it aims to shape adversaries' interpretations and responses in modern conflicts/wars (Moeller, 2014; Bagge, 2019, p. 37; Ahmad & Munk, 2025, p. 99; Maier, 2016). Intricately linked to reflexive control, *Maskirovka* manipulates perceptions to influence decisions in Russia's favour by using tailored information and exploiting biases, assumptions, and decision-making processes – along with falsehoods and absurd stories (Bagge, 2019, p. 71; Merriam, 2023; Thomas, 2004; Giles, 2016; Munk, 2024b). This strategy, rooted in Soviet-era techniques, uses modern tools for rapid dissemination online and offline. It

promotes state narratives, denies atrocities in Ukraine, and employs manipulated visuals, deepfakes, and false statements. These tactics, delivered through social media operations, proxy media, and state-controlled outlets, distort reality and influence public opinion both domestically and internationally (Wesolowski, 2022; Munk, 2024b, pp. 51–55; Ahmad & Munk, 2025, p. 99; Von Tunzelmann, 2022; U.S. Embassy in Romania, 2022; Paul, 2022).

Memetic Warfare

The West lags in developing memetic warfare, a powerful tool in information warfare. Gray (2021) defines memetic warfare as using viral memes, images, phrases, or maxims to embed narrative beliefs within a target audience to achieve specific political objectives. Unlike traditional propaganda tactics focused on short-term persuasion, memetic warfare seeks to establish deep-rooted perspectives on identity, values, and worldviews. This concept is embedded in information warfare and uses digital tools to disseminate influential narratives widely and swiftly (Gray, 2021, p. 15; Ascott, 2020; Siegel, 2017).

Munk (2023, 2024) offers a more precise definition: “Memetic warfare is a form of information warfare conducted online through memes and other tactics to achieve political, strategic, or ideological objectives. It involves the offensive or defensive circulation of content to influence public opinion, disrupt discourse, and advance the interests of those engaged in the campaign” (Munk, 2024b, pp. 62–63; Munk, 2023a; Munk, 2024c). This approach enables political expression and engagement without physical combat, allowing users to respond in real-time to political events through posts and comment sections (Denisova, 2019, p. 34; Ross & Rivers, 2017, p. 3). Both visual and non-visual memes are parts of psychological warfare, serving as digital tools to shape narratives and counter adversaries’ information campaigns. Memetic warfare also complements guerrilla tactics and trolling, which adds a dynamic element to influencing or disrupting an opponent’s information strategy (Giese, 2015, p. 69; Ascott, 2020; Munk, 2024b, pp. 5–6, 62–63; Way, 2021, p. 36).

Since 2012, Russian troll factories/farms like the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and the Social Design Agency have spread false narratives by mainly targeting the US, and its efforts have intensified after Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Operating under the Maskirovka strategy, these troll factories disseminate disinformation and divisive content to manipulate opinions and destabilise democracies. The former Wagner Group leader, Prigozhin, founded the IRA, and it gained notoriety for its role in the 2016 US Presidential election. It has continued to exploit global events to spread Kremlin-aligned narratives, including Crimea’s annexation, the occupation of the Donbas region, and the COVID-19 pandemic (EDMO, 2024; Munk, 2024b; Markelov, 2024). Despite US indictments of actors involved - and UK and EU sanctions, troll operations remain active. Their campaigns infiltrate Western discourse, undermine trust in institutions, and support pro-Russian candidates, as seen in elections such as those in Romania and Georgia in 2024. In Romania, the Constitutional Court annulled the presidential election results following intelligence reports of alleged Russian interference supporting the surprise frontrunner Georgescu via TikTok and Telegram (Fried et al., 2024; Mutler, 2024).

In response, Ukrainian public and private actors have adopted innovative communication strategies using memes’ viral appeal to challenge and debunk Russian narratives. Social media and online platforms are crucial in disseminating information and lobbying for international support for Ukraine, where voluntary resistance groups and individuals are active in the online warfare (Munk, 2024b, p. 78). Civic resistance movements support Ukraine using memes to counter Russian information pollution, raise awareness, and

mobilise support. The strategic use of social media by Ukrainian authorities and its supporters highlights the importance of swift, credible communication both domestically and internationally to secure military and economic aid and boost morale within the country (Munk, 2024b, pp. 95–108; Munk, 2023c; Munk, 2023b; Braum, 2022; Dougherty, 2023).

Perspective, Framework, and Goal

This study explores memes as defensive tools in memetic warfare, focusing on their use to counter information pollution. Memes, initially defined by Dawkins as cultural units replicating like genes, have evolved into rapidly shared digital artefacts such as slogans and catchphrases that transcend cultural boundaries (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 1889–1890; Hristova, 2014, p. 266; Burman, 2012, pp. 76–77; Hofstadter, 1985, p. 18). These modern memes enable individuals and groups to shape narratives, share information, and influence public opinion in digital spaces, making them potent tools in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine meme war (Jones, 2021, p. 113; Munk, 2024b; Munk, 2024a; Golovchenko et al., 2018, p. 981).

The goal is to examine the activities of the voluntary civic resistance group, NAFO, within the framework of memetic warfare by focusing on how memes are used to counter Russian information pollution. Through semiotic and contextual analysis, it explores a limited area of the group's actions, specifically the geopolitical implications that directly and indirectly affect Ukraine's efforts to defend itself. The review article seeks to contribute to understanding how digital tools and grassroots movements can combat information pollution and support political and social resistance. The objective of contextualising examples such as Russia's use of the Maskirovka strategy, US President Trump, the Republican Party (the GOP), and Russia's allied networks within a polarised digital landscape illustrate how memetic warfare interacts with global narratives. While the study emphasises NAFO's role in civic resistance, it does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of how different types of actors are using memes; instead, it focuses on NAFO's unique contributions within the Russia-Ukraine war and beyond.

Literature Review: The Power of Memes

The Russia-Ukraine war has demonstrated that online communications are instrumental in shaping public opinion and reinforcing narratives. Once primarily humorous, memes have become powerful tools for discrediting opponents, advancing political agendas, and amplifying social movements. The memes utilise digital culture's norms of peer sharing and content recycling, and now they are magnifying societal and political tensions, redefining online discourse and challenging traditional media's narrative control (Freelon & Karpf, 2015; Guggenheim et al., 2015; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018, pp. 2862–2863; Mina, 2014; Milner, 2013; Gray, 2021). Information pollution takes advantage of the population's vulnerability to harmful strategies like Maskirovka. This strategy enables malicious actors to undermine political systems or opponents systematically. Russia employs numerous online networks, such as the Kremlin-linked 'Doppelgänger' operation revealed in 2024. When active, this operation disseminated fake news globally, utilising AI-generated content on lookalike news websites and deploying social media bots to amplify pro-Russian narratives targeting NATO, Ukraine, and the US presidential election (EU Disinfo Lab, 2024; EDMO, 2024). The Russian-supported networks used *content bots* to post links and *promotion bots* to amplify them, ensuring widespread dissemination. Fake news reaches diverse audiences, where some online users would

knowingly reshare the falsehoods for fun or ideological alignment, while others involuntary spread them, mistaking them for being truthful information (Gilbert, 2024a; Department of the Treasury, 2024; UNDP, 2022a; O'Connor & Weatherhill, 2019, p. 154; Lillis & Schnell, 2024).

Memetic Warfare: A New Front in Information War

Despite their potential, the West has made a limited effort to formalise memetic warfare and develop offensive and defensive strategies for its operational use. In 2006, US Marine Corps Major Prosser proposed a NATO meme warfare centre, but the idea was not pursued (Ascott, 2020; Harvey, 2022; Siegel, 2017). Renewed interest came with Finkelstein's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's (DARPA) exploration of meme weaponisation – as well as NATO's Strategic Communications Centre and the EU Hybrid Threats Centre, focusing on hybrid warfare, including memes (Ascott, 2020; Finkelstein, 2011; Hybrid CoE, 2024). Despite this recognition, detailed analyses of its strategic use and impact remain limited. Ascott's work at the Royal United Services Institute (2020) is an exception. Thus, research traces memetic warfare from the former Soviet disinformation campaigns to the 2016 US Presidential election. However, practical applications and understanding of its impact are still evolving. Notably, awareness primarily focuses on defence against offensive memes, while understanding the use of defensive memes remains in its early stages (Harvey, 2022; Ascott, 2020; Siegel, 2017).

Fighting Back: The Use of Defensive Memes

Offensive memes are strategically crafted visual or textual content designed to spread information pollution, manipulate narratives, and target individuals or groups with ridicule and harassment. They aim to polarise audiences, distort facts, and promote biased agendas by using humour, sarcasm, and provocation to incite conflict and confusion. These areas amplify their reach and create a hostile digital environment that undermines meaningful discourse. Adversaries such as Russia have effectively adopted offensive memetic warfare, where it is integrated into broader distortion campaigns, employing troll farms and using AI-generated content to manipulate narratives to confuse (Munk, 2025, pp. 245–246). Western fact-checking efforts lag behind these proactive strategies, with social media algorithms amplifying inflammatory content and fostering echo chambers, making the fight against false narratives increasingly challenging (Cinelli et al., 2020; Munk, 2024a, pp. 61–62).

Contrary to offensive memes, defensive memes are visual and/or textual content designed to stop falsehoods, promote factual accuracy, boost the morale of those under attack, and foster critical thinking by using humour and simple messaging. Collaboration in memetic warfare extends across public and private actors but remains informal, unstructured, and focused on practical actions such as sharing defensive content and countering Russian communication online. Although various groups may have strategies, a unified communication framework is absent. Participants rely on mutual engagement to develop accessible response strategies and foster collective problem-solving. The memes serve as a tool to connect people across time, space, and social media networks (Demchak, 2011, p. 53; Sujon, 2021, pp. 17–18; Munk, 2024b, p. 62).

In the Ukrainian memetic war, online actors have demonstrated innovative skills in countering the *Maskirovka* strategy, fact-checking, and engaging users. These efforts

enhance resistance and build a sense of unity among supporters while excluding opposing groups (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2023, p. 2368; Ross & Rivers, 2017, p. 3; Munk, 2024b, p. 76–77). Ukraine has used social media effectively, spanning from President Zelenskyy's appeals to global audiences to grassroots and institutional meme campaigns on social media and virtual spaces (Munk, 2024b, 6–7; Munk & Ahmad, 2022; Chen et al., 2022). Pro-Ukraine memes promote unity and resistance, while pro-Russia memes aim to polarise societies and promote uncertainty – like the methods used by Trump's election campaign. The viral nature of memes is pivotal in Ukraine's public and private communication strategies. Key messages from authorities like Zelenskyy have been turned into memes, while actions, battles, and strongholds are elevated to heroic tales through the growing meme culture. Memes shape narratives, boost morale, and mock Russia with symbols, such as Zelenskyy in camouflage, the *Ghost of Kyiv*, and the phrase *Russian warship, go f*** yourself*, embodying Ukrainian resilience. Visual elements like the national flag, sunflowers, watermelons, and phrases, like *Slava Ukraini! / Heroiam slava!* further, galvanise global support. (Munk, 2024b, p. 119, 133–138, 150–152; Munk, 2023c; Munk, 2023b; Horbyk & Orlova, 2023; The Tsurkan, 2024).

Pro-Ukrainian Civic Resistance

Civic resistance has become a dominant strategy on the pro-Ukrainian side of the war. While unarmed in the traditional sense, participants in this resistance employ memes (images and text) as psychological weapons with effects that transcend the artefacts themselves (Chenoweth, 2021; Munk, 2024b, pp. 60–61; NAFO, 2024). Memes serve as a defensive tool, often emerging as a response to aggression or violence directed at groups or their allies, where the memesters' actions generate a cycle of action and reaction when posted online. Grassroots movements, though non-violent, engage in defiant, disruptive, and aggressive strategies to counter hostility (Chenoweth, 2021, pp. 2–3). These actions differ significantly from digital civic disobedience, which involves politically motivated online lawbreaking, such as hacktivism, to achieve political or ideological goals (Munk, 2022; Scheurman, 2018, p. 122; Lavorgna, 2020, pp. 59–60). Instead, civic resistance focuses on harnessing collective creativity and determination to defend against aggression and support Ukraine's efforts in the information war. Research into this area includes Munk's (2024) work on defining defensive memetic warfare and actors, Munk and Ahmad's (2022) analysis of the strategies and methods developed during the early stages of the Russian invasion, and Ahmad and Munk's (2025) exploration of the broader impacts of Russian information disorder (Munk, 2024b; Munk & Ahmad, 2022).

Individuals and collectives both possess the power to drive change. While individuals can make meaningful contributions on their own, collective action has the potential to challenge and transform the status quo through the combined efforts and shared purpose of a group (Pickney, 2020, p. 27). Collectively, these civic resistance groups form a powerful force, disrupting adversaries' objectives or forcing them to act against their intentions - while exposing these actions in ways that are hard to counter. Where Russia is eminent in using offensive communication tactics, they struggle with their defence strategies (Chenoweth, 2021, pp. 2,3, 35; Munk, 2024b, pp. 60–61; Munk, 2022, pp. 29–32). Both government entities and online volunteer groups engage in memetic warfare. However, the online collective NAFO has played an instrumental role in managing Russian information pollution. Other groups, such as the Lithuanian Elves and the Ukrainian IT Army, are involved in countering the Russian false and misleading communications (Munk & Ahmad, 2022;

Munk, 2024b, pp. 90–91; Smalley, 2022; Abend, 2022), but they are not directly engaged in memetic warfare. This research, therefore, focuses exclusively on NAFO's actions.

NAFO's Role in Memetic Warfare

NAFO has emerged as a pivotal voluntary grassroots digital movement, using mockery and memes in their online war against Russia while rallying global support for Ukraine. Established in May 2022 amidst Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NAFO began as a tongue-in-cheek initiative by @Kama_Kamilia on X (Twitter), where users could receive custom Shiba Inu *fella* avatars in exchange for donations to the Georgian Legion, a volunteer military unit aiding Ukraine (a link that later has been removed) (NAFO, 2024; Taylor, 2022; Ukrainer, 2022; Munk, 2024b, p. 95; Scott, 2022). Quickly, NAFO developed into a global force, deeply engaged in online activities (bonking) using memes blending satire and activism to challenge pro-Russian communications and actions. NAFO's logo resembles NATO's emblem (NAFO-OFAN), which incorporates a compass rose and comparable typography/colours to align with NATO. The members are deeply committed to combating Russian information pollution that directly or indirectly impacts Ukraine. Other actions are linked to crowdfunding, fundraising, charity engagement, and reporting accounts breaching social media companies' terms and conditions. Through merchandise sales and campaigns like #FreeTheLeopard, #FreeTheTaurus and #FreeTheFalcons, NAFO showcases the power of grassroots efforts in supporting Ukraine's defence and advocating for international military and humanitarian aid. NAFO's approach has garnered praise from global leaders, both Ukrainians, Europeans and Americans, who help further amplify NAFO's visibility and impact (Malukas, 2023; Kirichenko, 2023c; Smalley, 2022; Munk, 2024b, p. 65, 98–100, 106–108; Munk, 2023b; Koshelenko, 2024; Munk, 2023c; NV, 2023).

Weaponising Satire

Memetic warfare underpins NAFO's strategy, using humour and satire to expose and delegitimise Russian information distortion. These fellas mock vatniks (pro-Russian propagandists), especially those who use *whataboutism* to justify Russian aggression (Braun, 2022; Smart, 2023). Using memes challenges the seriousness of Kremlin narratives, such as the false *denazification* claims, by spotlighting the brutal realities of Russian aggression and occupation, including atrocities in Bucha and assaults on Bakhmut, Kharkiv, and other regions (Munk, 2024b, p. 53; Ahmad & Munk, 2025, pp. 102–103). NAFO's civic and decentralised structure is its defining strength, enabling flexibility and rapid responses in the volatile landscape of information warfare. The movement relies on *fellas* to ridicule and discredit Russian propaganda, primarily on platforms like X, Facebook, Reddit, and Telegram. Like NATO, the fellas can invoke Article 5 to organise a collective response against pro-Russian accounts. The principle remains the same: an *attack on one fella* is considered an *attack on all* (Dougherty, 2023; Propastop, 2024; Munk, 2024b, p. 98).

NAFO excels in using humour and parody to highlight absurdities and disrupt Russian communication efforts. Viral moments highlight NAFO's capacity to weaponise satire and turn attacks into their advances, such as ridiculing Russian diplomat Ulyanov or adopting the label of *CIA* in their bios. As a volunteer-driven group with no formal ties to authorities, its adaptability and playful tactics consistently undermine adversaries' efforts to categorise or discredit them – and this approach has unsettled pro-Russian actors (Munk, 2024b, pp. 174–175; Kirichenko, 2023c; York, 2022; Zappone, 2022; Braun, 2022). NAFO's

influence is evident in its responses to critics like Trump official Colby, whose anti-NAFO posts' comment fields were flooded with satirical Shiba Inu memes (Kirichenko, 2024), or US Representative Taylor Greene mockingly coined the slogan MUGA (Make Ukraine Great Again) to create a negative story about what American money was used for. However, NAFO happily adopted this phrase as a pro-Ukraine supportive slogan and created MUGA-inspired memes and merchandise, with proceeds supporting Ukraine. Such initiatives have turned adversarial attacks into successful campaigns, further strengthening NAFO's role in the information war (Gacia, 2024; Pavliuk, 2024; Saint Javelin, 2024).

Future Directions for NAFO

Despite its successes, NAFO faces challenges in expanding beyond Western digital spaces, particularly in the Global South, where Russian propaganda thrives. To grow, NAFO could establish regional structures and flexible leadership, enabling targeted campaigns and sustained engagement across diverse geopolitical contexts (Kirichenko, 2023a; Kirichenko, 2023b). Unlike state-sponsored propaganda, this group relies on volunteer-driven efforts, empowering ordinary citizens to engage in information warfare. Its success in mobilising communities, amplifying pro-Ukrainian messages, and countering information pollution demonstrates the power of grassroots digital activism in effectively challenging authoritarian narratives. As NAFO evolves to meet changing circumstances, its blend of humour, civic engagement, and strategic partnerships has established it as a powerful memetic force and a symbol of solidarity with Ukraine. However, this raises the question of whether a more formal structure is needed to enhance its impact or if formalisation might undermine its innovative nature. NAFO's strength lies in its members' autonomy, allowing individuals to contribute on their terms, choose their goals, and act within a flexible group setting driven by the available time and resources. Balancing structure with this grassroots spontaneity is crucial to preserving its effectiveness and creativity (Munk, 2024b, pp. 174–175; Munk, 2023c; Munk, 2023b; McInnis et al., 2022; Kirichenko, 2023c).

Methodology

This study uses digital ethnography, semiotic interpretation, and contextual analysis to examine how NAFO-affiliated communities use defensive memes. By focusing on NAFO's informal strategies for creating counter-narratives and fostering online resistance, the research adopts a qualitative approach that aligns with memes' complex and multimodal nature. This method provides a deeper understanding of memes' role in digital activism and information warfare.

Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography allows in-depth and remote observation of prominent NAFO-affiliated accounts on X, focusing on how the community creates, shares, and repurposes memes on social media (Lindgren et al., 2024, p.89; Lang & Benbunan-Fich, 2012; Postill & Pink, 2012; Hine, 2000; Forberg & Schilt, 2023). Shifman (2014) defines memes as “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance” created with mutual awareness, circulated, and transformed online. This view positions

memes as a cultural practice embedded in digital spaces, reflecting societal and political responses to current events (Jenkins et al., 2013; Shifman, 2014, p. 8; Bülow & Johann, 2023, p. 3; Rogers & Giorgi, 2024, p. 75). This study employs digital ethnography to systematically observe and analyse NAFO's use of memes, capturing a snapshot of their responses to global geopolitical issues. The ethnographic approach documents memes and examines their evolution in real-time, responding to specific events, statements, and crises. The contextualisation of memes is influenced by the platforms where they are created and shared, with site selection shaping the sample composition and research perspective.

This qualitative method provides a detailed understanding of how NAFO uses memes to address global issues and engage in memetic warfare (Rogers & Giorgi, 2024, p. 75). This study identifies X as the primary platform for analysis due to NAFO's significant presence and consistent activities in countering Russian information pollution. Despite declining popularity and user migration to platforms like BlueSky following the US presidential election (Ittimani, 2024; AP, 2024; AFP, 2024), X remains a critical memetic battleground. The platform continues to host active engagement by key pro-Russian actors and institutions, making it a focal point for spreading information pollution. NAFO's counteractions on X further solidify its importance, as the platform serves as a central stage for their memetic resistance and digital activism during the selected study period (Rogers & Giorgi, 2024, p. 75).

Meme Sampling

The contextual analysis of memes, textual and visual, provides a structured framework to identify recurring themes and rhetorical strategies employed by NAFO members. Memes were collected from NAFO-related accounts on X between December 2023 and November 2024 as part of a more extensive digital ethnographic study into memetic warfare. This analysis considers the political, cultural, and societal contexts that give memes meaning and political potential, particularly Russia's manipulative tactics and current geopolitical stance (Denisova, 2019, pp. 10, 29; Way, 2021, p. 30).

The original database comprises over 10,000 memes, from which 240 were deemed relevant to this study. A sampling method was employed to organise and refine the research scope for a focused analysis. This was done to manage the high volume and ensure diversity while avoiding redundancy. Memes with highly similar content or repetitive themes were grouped to enable the identification of representative samples from each group. This process ensured that the selected memes captured the breadth of NAFO's actions while maintaining a manageable scope for analysis. Ultimately, 43 memes were chosen to represent NAFO's campaigns across three thematic areas (Tables). 24 of these images are showcased in this paper to give a feeling of the interplay of the visuals/ text and the thematic context (Figures). Overly sexualised or violent images have been excluded as they are not relevant to the analysis. To mitigate bias and prioritise deeper analysis, the selected memes were stripped of all visual identifiers and placed in tables during the study, focusing on their semiotic and contextual elements.

The three key themes identified are:

Calling Out Russian Propaganda Memes exposing and satirising Russia's use of information pollution (13 memes).

- *Direct Call-out of Falsehoods and Propaganda from Russia* (7 memes, Table 1).
- *Humour, Mockery and Resilience* (6 memes, Table 2).

The Alleged Link between Putin, Trump, and the US GOP Party Memes drawing connections between Russian influence and key US political Fig. (15 memes)

- *Implying Trump is a Russian Asset* (7 memes, Table 3).
- *Critique of GOP's Alignment with Russia* (8 memes, Table 4).

Putin and the Axis of Evil Memes associating Russia with other authoritarian regimes and alliances perceived as threats to global stability (15 memes).

- *Enabling Russian Aggression* (7 memes, Table 5).
- *Global Network of Complicit Actors* (8 memes, Table 6).

The sampling selection goes beyond criticising Russian propaganda related to the Russia-Ukraine war. Instead, the memes target figures and groups with alleged ties to Russia and frame them as unreliable players in the global information war. This approach balances representativeness and focus, capturing the complexity and diversity of NAFO's memetic strategies while maintaining analytical manageability.

Multimodal and Semiotic Interpretation

Memes are powerful tools of influence, rapidly spreading across social media to shape perceptions and embed ideas, often regardless of their accuracy (Jones, 2021, pp. 168–169; Brodie, 2009). Brodie (2009) notes, “If the meme is in your mind, it can subtly or significantly influence your behaviour”. Their amplification through social media allows them to outpace traditional media in shaping public discourse, driving political agendas, and disseminating divisive narratives (Jones, 2021, p. 170; Munk, 2024b; Munk, 2024a). According to Milner (2012), memes are “amateur media artefacts, extensively remixed and recirculated”, adapting across cultural contexts through layered meanings interpreted via shared knowledge (Jewitt, 2013, pp. 251–252; Jones, 2021, p. 1; Grundlingh, 2018, p. 149). This reflects theories of multimodality and re-semiotisation as they adapt across cultural contexts. Memes communicate through layered meanings that audiences interpret based on shared cultural knowledge. This multimodal study examines how images, text, symbolism, and context interact to create meaning amplified by digital technologies. The research uses the within-method triangulation in digital ethnography, and qualitative methods are adopted to explore the depth and interactions of memes. At the same time, semiotic interpretation is key to understanding and decoding their layered meanings within a contemporary geopolitical context (Jewitt et al., 2016, p. 3; Lindgren & Eriksson Krutrök, 2024, p. 33).

The selected memes are analysed for their use of imagery, language, and symbols, highlighting their role as visual and textual counter-narratives. The analysis prioritises the inherent language of memes, such as humour, irony, and visual cues, to uncover how they convey complex political positions and shared cultural codes to communicate emotions, opinions, and intentions (Bracciale & Aglioti Colombini, 2023, p. 2; Grundlingh, 2018; Glăveanu et al., 2018; López-Paredes & Carrillo-Andrade, 2022; Mina, 2014). By analysing the interplay of these elements, the study reveals how memes function as multimodal artefacts, shaping public discourse and countering Russian information pollution through layered meanings.

Framework for Political Contextual Analysis

The context of memes is essential for decoding their political, cultural, and societal significance, particularly in the face of Russia's manipulative tactics and geopolitical stance (Denisova, 2019, pp. 10, 29; Way, 2021, p. 30). Memes are pop-cultural artefacts that merge media texts with public discourse. As they are constantly remixed and circulated, they require contextual analysis for practical semiotic interpretation to uncover their connections to broader events and trends, as *context matters* (Way, 2021, p. 89; Willems, 2021). By linking meme activity to key political developments—such as Putin and Russia's information disorder campaigns (Table 1, and 2), Trump and the GOP (Table 3, and 4), and Russian allies (Table 5, and 6)—it highlights memes as tools of counter-narrative and resistance.

The Research Context

During the research period, Trump's statements about resolving the Russia-Ukraine war within 24 hours and aligning with America First policies raised concerns among NAFO members and Ukraine supporters (Sullivan, 2024; Sabbagh, 2024; Jenkins, 2024). His perceived closeness to Russia's President Putin and signals of a potential realignment of US foreign policy towards Russian interests heightened anxieties over Ukraine's sovereignty, NATO's stability, and transatlantic unity (de Bondern, 2024; BBC News, 2019). Trump's vague promises to end the war and reduced military aid further cast doubt on US support for Ukraine. In response, NAFO intensified its focus on alleged Putin-Trump/GOP ties, using sharp satire in memes to highlight the risks of Russian influence and its impact on Ukraine (Gray et al., 2024; Rooks, 2024; Belin et al., 2024). The 2024 US Presidential election plays a critical role in Ukraine's future, with Trump's administration introducing uncertainty. If Vice President Harris had been elected, she was expected to continue President Biden's pro-Ukraine policies.

Russia's alliances with countries like Iran, North Korea, India, and China have bolstered its military efforts beyond Ukraine, mitigating the effects of its geopolitical isolation following the 2022 invasion. The 'no limits' partnership between Putin and China's President Xi (2022) has strengthened trade and stabilised Russia's economy under Western sanctions. Russian allied countries supply weapons, intelligence, and help spreading the Russian narratives globally (Borshchevskaya, 2022; GOV.UK, 2024; Katz, 2024; Todd Lopez, 2024; Citrinowicz, 2024; Christoffersen, 2024). Iranian drones and missiles, North Korean soldiers, and Chinese-manufactured drones and materials have been pivotal in the Russia-Ukraine war (Ye Hee Lee & Dixon, 2024; Sauer, 2024; RFE/RL, 2024; Vinocur, 2024). In Europe, Russia exploits populist governments and historical ties in Hungary, Slovakia, and Belarus to manipulate political discourse and sow discord (Masters, 2024; Sullivan, 2022; Johnson, 2024b; Ronay, 2024; Lanoszka, 2016). Russian-backed campaigns, such as those supporting pro-Russia actors in Georgia's 2024 parliamentary elections, further reshape regional dynamics (Freedom House, 2024; Lautman, 2024; Chkhaidze, 2024; Watling, 2024).

Method Limitations and Challenges

This research encounters several methodological challenges alongside its limitations. The transient nature of social media makes tracking deleted or altered memes difficult.

While the study benefits from a well-curated collection since February 2022, its focus on X limits its scope. It lacks the opportunity to engage with other social media platforms that might reveal different memes and distribution patterns. While the qualitative approach provides depth, it cannot measure large-scale trends such as meme curation, spread, engagement, or lifecycle. Furthermore, sampling a vast dataset of memes presents challenges in achieving balance and avoiding unintended thematic bias. These challenges, however, are inherent to studying a fluid and dynamic phenomenon like memetic warfare. The study addresses these by prioritising depth over breadth, focusing specifically on NAFO's activities on X. This qualitative focus allows for a nuanced exploration of the semiotic and contextual elements of memes, offering a detailed case study of NAFO's role in countering information pollution, despite the complexities of capturing the full spectrum of memetic warfare.

Research Ethics

This research addresses ethical issues in studying online communities and analysing public content on X. Observing NAFO-affiliated accounts and manually collecting memes based on themes, it respects user anonymity by focusing on meme patterns rather than individual motives. Following Postill and Pink's (2012) guidance, the study treats public online spaces cautiously, aiming not to misrepresent or invade participants' privacy – Nor put any memesters at risk to ensure contextual integrity (Lindgren & Krutrök. 2024, p. 65; Ash et al., 2024, p. 50).

Transparency about meme evolution and cultural sensitivities is essential to maintain analytical integrity, alongside compliance with data usage laws. Reflexivity and clear ethical decisions ensure the anonymity of individuals whose content is analysed (Ash et al., 2024, p. 56; Lindgren & Krutrök. 2024, pp. 70–71; Pink, 2021, p. 45). Researching online posts in memetic warfare involved ethical measures such as removing usernames and timestamps to protect privacy and prevent re-identification. The research has avoided using content that could risk reputational harm or unintended exposure for the NAFO members. The study focuses solely on memes, excluding personal text and names/tags to safeguard creators and avoid amplifying harmful narratives.

Defensive memes aim to counter harmful narratives but risk contributing to information pollution by employing similar tactics. Shifman (2014) highlights that due to the nature of memes, the content can blur the lines between corrective narratives and divisive rhetoric, potentially intensifying polarisation rather than fostering informed discourse. Bias was managed through a systematic, theme-focused approach to meme selection and analysis to minimise subjectivity. The memes have been handled carefully to preserve the integrity of the analysis's context. The memes are not taken out of context or misrepresented in the analysis, nor is there an over-generalisation or distortion of the context of the memes.

The ethics of memetic warfare also raise concerns, as it involves countering Russian communications with emotionally charged and satirical content. The research carefully examines the cultural and political perspectives embedded in the memes, particularly when addressing sensitive war-related content. Maintaining an objective and neutral tone when describing the memes in the tables has been crucial to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes or misrepresentations. It has also been important to adopt a neutral tone when describing military issues, as there is a tendency for discussions of

war, warfare, and related topics to involve highly value-laden rhetoric and jargon. This approach ensures that the analysis remains balanced and avoids inadvertently reinforcing biases or emotionally charged narratives.

Findings: Memes in Action

NAFO’s activities focus on two key aspects of civic resistance: combating information pollution and highlighting geopolitical issues that may weaken Ukraine’s military and political standing, which are often neglected by mainstream media. Rather than employing hostility, NAFO’s approach catches attention and encourages reflection on the potential implications of the Maskirovka strategy. By ridiculing official statements and caricaturing leaders, NAFO memes strip Russian communications of its authority and critique global actors aligned with Russia, including Trump and allied authoritarian states. These alliances are portrayed as complicit in sustaining aggression and undermining international stability.

Russian Information Pollution

NAFO’s strategic use of mockery and sarcasm in its memes is a powerful tool of civic resistance, effectively challenging Russian communications and narratives. These memes actively target manipulative content, prompting digital audiences to critically evaluate pro-Russian rhetoric and serve as a fact-checking tool. It is crucial to acknowledge the impact of the Maskirovka strategy on public opinion and its potential to undermine support for Ukraine if left unchallenged. To combat this, NAFO actively disrupt their spread and limit their influence. By amplifying counter-narratives, NAFO challenges misleading content and frustrates its creators by effectively undermining their efforts.

Direct Call-Out of Falsehoods and Propaganda from Russia

By associating terms such as *lies*, *disinformation*, and *propaganda* (Images 1, 2, 3 and 4) with Russian symbols like the flag, coat of arms, and Soviet hammer and sickle, the memes draw attention to the historical roots of these tactics and evoke collective memories of their use. NAFO highlights the harmful nature of Russian communications by likening them to a toxic threat and reflecting frustration with the Kremlin’s reliance on deceitful narratives.



Image 1: Lavrov lies about plans; Image 2: Flagging a warning about disinformation; Image 3: Warning about lies; Image 4: Lavrov and Putin admit their lies

Table 1 Direct call-out of Falsehoods and Propaganda from Russia

“Shh! Don’t tell anybody that this is just a fake Russian propaganda story”: Satirises a smug-looking Putin, portraying him as openly acknowledging the fabrication of Russian propaganda.
We are not planning to attack other countries. We didn’t attack Ukraine, either”: Mocks Russian denials of aggression, highlighting the irony and deception in their rhetoric (Image 1).
“Killer, Liar, Thief”: Features Putin with totalitarian symbols (hammer and sickle) in the background, connecting modern propaganda to historical regimes known for deception.
“Warning: The above tweet contains gaslighting, lies, and insanity”: Exhibits a warning label with the text to dramatise the dangers of consuming Russian content - by portraying it as inherently misleading.
“This Information Was Brought to You by the Russian State Media”: Incorporates Orwellian references, such as “War is Peace”, to satirise Russian media distortion and manipulation (Image 2).
“Russian Ministry of Propaganda with Verified Lies”: Parodies official symbols and emphasises that dishonesty is an institutionalised part of Russian state media (Image 3).
We Lie to You Every Day!”: Features Putin and Lavrov laughing about their manipulative tactics and propaganda (Image 4).

Humour, Mockery and Resilience

NAFO memes leverage humour to discredit Russian propaganda, with the Shiba Inu avatar symbolising the group’s resistance against information pollution. The Shiba Inu fellas resonate with both politically engaged and casual audiences by embodying defiance through digital culture’s preference for approachable and relatable figures, such as dogs portrayed as heroes in narratives of resistance. By countering absurd narratives with equally absurd visuals and terms like *boring*, *bullshit*, *lies* and *propaganda* (Images 5, 6, 7 and 8), they emphasise the tiredness and redundancy of Russian communications and reinforce public scepticism.



Image 5: An angry fella warns; Image 6: Fella finds the propaganda boring; Image 7: How fellas react to dangers; Image 8: Fella investigates propaganda

Table 2 Humour, Mockery and Resilience

“Russian Propaganda? Yuck!!!”: Shows a disgusted fella’s repulsion toward disinformation, using humour to emphasise its disdain (Image 5).
“When You are not Posting Lies... Wake Me Up”: A sleeping fella demonstrates that Russian media’s lies are so constant they are no longer worth attention.
“Your Propaganda is Boring, Get Some New Material”: Shows a bored man sarcastically dismissing Russian disinformation as uninspired and repetitive (Image 6).
Doorbell, mailman, burglary, vatnik propaganda panel: Depicts a calm fella, alarmed only by “Vatnik Propaganda”. It humorously highlights the dangerousness of Russian propaganda (Image 7)
“Lies are Exposed when Reality Arrives!”: Showing a red-eye fella with lightning eyes to support NAFO’s argument that truth is a powerful weapon against deception.
“Yep! Looks like Bullshit from this Angle too!”: Displays a lying-down fella looking up to suggest that no matter how Russian propaganda is presented, it remains nonsense (Image 8).

The Alleged Link Between Putin, Trump, and the US GOP Party

The 2024 US Presidential election has raised concerns about Ukraine’s future, fuelled by Trump’s campaign rhetoric, their past ties to authoritarian figures like Putin, and evidence of Russian voter influence efforts. NAFO memes critique Trump, the GOP, and their perceived alignment with Russian interests, highlighting the risks of pro-Russian leadership and diminished support for Ukraine during the ongoing war. These memes convey anxieties about foreign influence, encouraging critical reflection on the implications of political choices. The use of humour lowers barriers to engagement and makes political issues accessible to a broader audience.

Implying Trump is a Russian Asset

These memes portray Trump as subservient to Putin, mocking their alignment with a former Cold War adversary and questioning their loyalty to American values. By showing them as *Putin’s puppet/dog, protected by Putin* and *Russia’s best agent* (Images 9, 10, 11 and 12), the memes emphasise the risks of aligning US policy with Russian interests. In these memes, NAFO presents Trump as a threat to national security both domestically and internationally.



Image 9: Trump as Putin’s mouthpiece; Image 10: Putin as the protector of Trump; Image 11: Trump being led by Putin; Image 12: Trump as a foreign agent

Table 3 Implying Trump is a Russian Asset

<p>“Putin & His Puppet”: Reinforces a ventriloquist portrayal of Trump as a controlled figure manipulated by Putin (Image 9).</p> <p>Putin in military attire carrying Trump, dressed in a flamboyant pink outfit: The image resembling Trump as a parody of a doll or beauty queen reliant on Putin to save him (Image 10)</p> <p>“MAGA: Moscow Agent Grifting America”: Reimagines Trump’s slogan, linking MAGA ideology to Russia rather than American patriotism.</p> <p>“Comrade Traitor”: Shows a caricature of Trump with Soviet symbols in the background, accusing him of betraying American values.</p> <p>“Walls are useless when the enemy is within”: Shows Trump in a Russian winter hat, implying that Trump’s link to Russia is an internal threat to America.</p> <p>“Make America Russian Again”: Depicts Putin holding Trump on a leash, symbolising Trump’s lack of autonomy and subjugation to Russian interests (Image 11)</p> <p>“He’s the Best Russian Agent They Ever Had”: Shows a medal-covered Trump beside Putin, portraying him as a decorated ‘agent’ and ridiculing his loyalty to the US (Image 12)</p>
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Critique of GOP's Alignment with Russia

These memes accuse the GOP of aligning with Russian interests and abandoning traditional American values. They suggest that a GOP and Trump-led administration would prioritise Putin's agenda. NAFO are portraying the GOP leaders as *puppets*, *anti-American* and *brought* (Images 13, 14, 15) by Putin due to their hatred for the Democratic Party and their anti-Ukrainian stance. This raises concerns about whose interests the GOP truly serves.



Image 13: Putin talks about buying the GOP; Image 14: The GOP as a Russian entity; Image 15: Putin celebrates the GOP deception; Image 16: The GOP as fans

Table 4 Critique of GOP's Alignment with Russia

<p>“Chairman of the Republican Party”: Shows a smiling Putin, suggesting that the GOP’s loyalty lies with Russian influence rather than American values.</p>
<p>“Buy American. I Bought One Trump and Got the Entire Republican Party for Free”: Satirises the GOP’s alignment with Trump and, by extension, Russian interests, critiquing their perceived lack of independence (Image 13).</p>
<p>“The only thing easier to buy in America than a gun is a Republican”: Implies that Republican politicians are susceptible to foreign influence, particularly from Russia.</p>
<p>“GOP: They’re Not Even Pretending to be Americans Anymore”: Juxtaposes the GOP acronym with Soviet emblems, sarcastically implying a shift in values (Image 14).</p>
<p>“We Did Not Get Trump Elected Because We Like Trump. We Hate America, and He is Weak and Stupid, and That is Good for Us”: Shows Putin critiquing the strategic motivations behind Russia’s alleged support for Trump.</p>
<p>“Cheers for Hating Democrats so Much You’d Rather be My Puppets”: Features Putin to mock the GOP’s prioritisation of partisanship over national integrity (Image 15).</p>
<p>“Republicans Hate Zelensky for Not Surrendering to Putin Like They Did”: Uses Ukraine’s national flower and colours to contrast Ukrainian resistance with perceived GOP submission to Russian interests.</p>
<p>“GOP: Groupies of Putin”: Depicts Putin branding the GOP as fans, which mocks their alleged deference to Russian influence (Image 16).</p>

Putin and the AXIS of EVIL

These memes critique authoritarian alliances supporting Russian aggression, using satire to expose their material, ideological, and diplomatic backing. The NAFO memes also reveal the involvement of actors directly aiding Russia’s war effort while falsely claiming neutrality. They inform global audiences about these often-overlooked connections and challenge the information pollution that conceals them, drawing parallels to memes targeting Trump and the GOP.

Enabling Russian Aggression

These memes critique enablers of Russia’s aggression, such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Hungary, mocking their leaders for feigned neutrality while supporting hostility. NAFO exposes these opportunistic alliances and Russia’s reliance on them to sustain its war effort. By highlighting vulnerabilities in these relationships, the memes challenge the power dynamics and erode Russia’s image of authority using phrases like *help, not a friend, partners* and *relying* (Images 17, 18, 19 and 20), emphasising its relationship with these states for aid and trade.



Image 17: Jong-un and Khamenei mock Putin for lack of strength; Image 18: Putin and Xi as partners in crime; Image 19: Disabled Putin needs support from allies; Image 20: Russia is not a superpower

Table 5 Enabling Russian Aggression

<p>“Russia Trading Oil for Arms with North Korea”: Critiques Russia’s dependence on North Korea for military aid, mocking this relationship as a sign of desperation.</p>
<p>“China Provides Satellite Imagery”, “China is not a friend”: Shows Xi subtly aiding Putin through technological support, emphasising China’s indirect role in Russia’s aggression.</p>
<p>“Need Our Help Again?”: Shows Russia, North Korea, and Iran reconnecting, mocking Russia’s reliance on old allies for assistance (Image 17).</p>
<p>“Partners in Genocide”: Features Putin and Xi embracing each other in their complicity in human rights violations (Image 18).</p>
<p>Modi with Putin as a Dancer: Highlights India’s ambiguous stance by critiquing its weak condemnation of Russia.</p>
<p>Putin in a wheelchair pushed by allies: Symbolises Putin’s dependence on authoritarian allies as a sign of weakness (Image 19).</p>
<p>“Imagine Thinking You’re a Superpower”: Mocks Russia’s reliance on weaker states like Belarus and North Korea, underlining the irony in its alliances (Image 20).</p>

Global Network of Complicit Actors

Memes expose Russia’s network of authoritarian allies, highlighting their complicity in atrocities in Ukraine and their role in supporting Russia’s efforts to influence and undermine states globally. United in their opposition to the West, these alliances are crucial for sustaining Russia’s war and advancing its imperial ambitions. By using phrases and images to highlight areas such as *Terrorism*, *Axis of Evil*, *alignments* and *Authoritarian Family* (Images 21, 22, 23 and 24), NAFO highlights that these alliances threaten global security and stability.



Image 21: The octopus-formation of enablers and targets; Image 22: The idyllic family of allies; Image 23: The axis of evil then and now; Image 24: Four states considered terrorists

Table 6 Global Network of Complicit Actors

Octopus with the Russian flag and tentacles of various allied countries/targets: Uses the ‘octopus’ metaphor to show Russia’s influence spreading across allied states (Image 21).

Putin surrounded by global allies in Matryoshka dolls: Highlights the layered support system of authoritarian states working together to sustain Russia’s war efforts.

“Peacemakers”: Features Modi, Orbán, and Putin amid destruction, mocking their claims of neutrality while supporting destabilising actions.

“They Are the Same Thing”: Displays Putin, Assad, Khamenei and Nasrallah on banners side-by-side, showcasing the irony of their peaceful claims amid violent, oppressive actions.

“Authoritarian Family”: Displays authoritarian leaders like Putin and Xi as a “family” with baby Orbán. It ridicules their current togetherness and hierarchical dynamics (Image 22).

Xi with Miniature Allies: Shows Putin, Jong-un, Khamenei, and Lukashenko as Mini-me and Xi as Dr Evil, the dominant power, subtly controlling its less influential authoritarian counterparts.

“Axis of Evil Leaders Then”, “Axis of Evil Leaders Now”: Equates WWII’s authoritarian Axis Powers with modern leaders, i.e. Xi, Putin, Jong-un, Khamenei, and Hlaing (Image 23).

“Terrorism”: Depicts leaders from Iran, China, North Korea, and Russia around a blood-stained hand, equating their regimes to a collective threat (Image 24).

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

NAFO’s defensive memes expose Russia’s use of Maskirovka and reflexive control to pollute the information sphere, as well as the collaboration of states and actors supporting Russia, including during the 2024 US Presidential election and Russia’s growing global influence (Berman, 2023, pp. 26–27; Kowalski, 2023; Scroton, 2023). This research highlights NAFO’s role as a prominent resistance movement countering Russian information pollution through civic resistance, focusing on exposing falsehoods and informing audiences about key events rather than engaging in aggressive memetic warfare. While meme virality is unpredictable, the analysis identifies some of the consistent themes that have emerged during the timeframe, often overshadowed by the US Presidential election and the battle between the two parties.

Evaluation of Findings

The intensification of Russian tactics illustrates how information pollution has become a cornerstone of modern hybrid warfare. Russia’s reliance on its Maskirovka strategy, spreading false narratives and sowing discord, has permeated digital platforms, amplified

societal divisions, and undermined democratic processes (Munk, 2024b; Ahmad & Munk, 2025). For example, The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), FBI, and CISA identified Russia as a significant threat to 2024 US election integrity, using fake articles and videos to deepen social divisions, incite fear, and erode trust, particularly in swing states - with escalation expected around election day and afterwards (CISA, 2024; Boran, 2024; Johnson, 2024b). The Doppelgänger indictment (2024) exposed Russian actors directed by Putin's administration, covertly spreading propaganda to weaken support for Ukraine, promote pro-Russian interests, and influence the 2024 US Presidential election in Russia's favour (DoJ, 2004a, b). NAFO's counter-memes are crucial in disrupting these narratives, particularly those linking Trump and the GOP to Russian interests. Through playful visuals, they highlighted the risks of Trump's ambiguous promises to end the Ukraine war and his criticism of the US aid and military support, casting doubt on his policies and exposing the broader impact of Russian influence in Western politics (Rooks, 2024; Reuters, 2024). European officials fear Trump's criticism of NATO and Ukraine could encourage Putin to target NATO countries, while the outgoing Biden administration responded with a \$50 billion loan for Ukraine and adjusted military aid, measures that could be reversed under the new Trump presidency (Gray et al., 2024).

Russia's global strategy includes cyber operations, memetic warfare, and alliances with states such as Iran, North Korea, and China (CISA, 2024; DNI, 2024). Though opportunistic and fraught with mistrust, these partnerships support Russia's military and informational objectives. Russian campaigns exploit strategic ambiguity, expanding media influence beyond the *Russkiy Mir* into Latin America, Africa, and South Asia while fuelling fears of economic hardship and food insecurity. By portraying itself as a victim and blaming the West for global crises, Russia pressures vulnerable nations to shift public opinion and lift sanctions imposed since 2022 (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2024; Berman, 2023, pp. 26–27; Scroxtton, 2023; Kowalski, 2023). The Kremlin's information pollution campaigns exploit social media echo chambers by using cognitive biases and algorithms to promote anti-West narratives. This approach highlights Russia's skill in exploiting fragile alliances and manipulating public opinion to achieve strategic gains (Matasick et al., 2020; Sleibi, 2023).

While some key states have advocated for peace between Russia and Ukraine, they have avoided criticising Russian authorities, even while supplying aid and weapons to Russia. In contrast, heavily sanctioned states like Iran and North Korea have forged new alliances with Russia and openly support its efforts to continue the war. China has maintained 'neutrality' in the Russia-Ukraine war, balancing ties with the West and Russia. While avoiding direct military aid, China exports dual-use goods to Russia and supports its economy without overtly taking sides (Christoffersen, 2024). NAFO members highlighted the adversary alliance of Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, citing unified actions like North Korea's troop support for Russia and the 2022 Xi-Putin friendship declaration. Russia's dependence on Iranian drones and ammunition under sanctions exposes its reliance and weakens its claim of military supremacy (U.S.-China E&SRC, 2024; Sadjadpour & Grajewski, 2024). The stability of these alliances remains uncertain, as they may dissolve if Russia loses its value to these partners. The Russian and North Korean 2024 defence pact and the use of North Korean troops in Ukraine have strained Russia's ties with China. China's unease over this growing cooperation - and its silence over the matter fuels concerns that this alliance may strengthen US-led coalitions in East Asia and place China in a difficult situation in the region (Wintour, 2024; Tang & Moritsugu, 2024).

NAFO is crucial in exploiting information strategies used by Russia and its authoritarian allies. Thereby, the civic actors are instrumental in drawing attention to issues, and

undermining the credibility of their communications. It also highlights Russian allies' complicity in the war and their potential ambitions to replicate such actions elsewhere (Walla, 2024; Humiski, 2022; Kirichenko, 2023b). NAFO's decentralised model provides flexibility but lacks the strategic coordination needed for broader applicability and fully coordinated actions. Its effectiveness relies on the moral clarity of Ukraine's war and strong Western support. Therefore, it is uncertain whether the model could be replicated in other scenarios, such as a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan or escalations in the Israel-Palestine conflict and regional war (Humiski, 2022; Kirichenko, 2023b).

Policy Implications

NAFO's actions, while impactful, cannot stand alone and must be part of a broader strategy. Memetic warfare involves diverse groups of actors (public and private) with varying motivations, demonstrating the need for clear rules and guidelines to prevent misuse in online spaces. Relying on private actors to counter falsehoods raises concerns about accountability and transparency (Munk, 2024b, p. 166). Key actions include requiring social media companies to implement transparent algorithms to limit the spread of unreliable information, strengthening content moderation to remove false and misleading material, and enhancing media literacy to help users critically evaluate information and resist manipulation. However, the tendency is to go in the opposite direction and remove fact-checking and moderation from social media sites (Munk, 2025). Policymakers could focus on strengthening measures to prevent the circulation of information pollution and develop strategies to manage information warfare. This includes establishing communication guidelines, best practices, and collaborative frameworks. Addressing these issues would require global cooperation among states and collaboration across social media platforms and virtual environments. However, establishing international regulations and enforcement mechanisms for the information sphere remains challenging, as fostering dialogue between Western and Eastern blocs within the UN has proven difficult. Additionally, the current geopolitical climate, the marketisation of data from social media, and the different regulatory environments of multinational tech companies worldwide make creating a unified approach to reducing information pollution largely unfeasible (Munk, 2024b, p. 173; Munk, 2022, pp. 87–90; Munk, 2024b, pp. 79, 145).

Limitations and Further Research

While the timeframe for meme collection is clearly defined (December 2023–November 2024), the geographic scope of NAFO's activities is ambiguous due to the transient nature of social media and the ephemeral lifecycle of memes. This research examines English-language memes within NAFO communities, excluding non-English content like Ukrainian-language memes, which shapes how the war is perceived both within Ukraine and by Ukrainians abroad. Solely focusing on NAFO narrows the scope by omitting other public and private actors engaged in memetic warfare. The study also excludes significant Russian-language content and pro-Russian campaigns, restricting analysis of state-sponsored offensive meme strategies. This is partly due to restricted access to internal Russian social media sites and groups, but also to the researcher's language barriers, requiring reliance primarily on Russian authorities and pro-Russian supporters posting in English.

The key arguments are well-justified, and while the research acknowledges certain limitations, these are clearly outlined. Nonetheless, there remains scope for future research.

The exclusion of non-English content, such as Ukrainian-language memes calls for more in-depth research. However, language barriers make it challenging to include Ukrainian memes and analyse the political layers embedded within them. Similarly, the focus on NAFO's counter-narratives prioritises defensive memes but leaves room for a comprehensive investigation into Russian-language content and offensive meme campaigns in future comparative research. Expanding beyond the Global North to include actors from other regions would also enrich the understanding of memetic warfare's cultural and political dimensions and provide a holistic view of the role and impact of memes in global information warfare. Future studies should explore the long-term effects of memes on political and social narratives, including the unintended consequences of defensive memes, the spread of memes, and the rapid expansion of memetic warfare. Another important area is to develop strategies to counter offensive campaigns on multiple levels. Incorporating interviews, surveys, and quantitative methods will be crucial for uncovering memes' influence on public perceptions, especially as technologies like generative AI and deepfakes evolve.

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